In Search of Lost Texts: Memory and the Existential Quest in Peter Handke's *Die Hornissen*

THOMAS F. BARRY *University of Southern California, Los Angeles*

In a radio review broadcast shortly after the publication of Peter Handke's first novel, *Die Hornissen* (1966), Heinrich Vormweg observed that this dense and obscure text arouses 'das Gefühl der Langeweile beim Leser bis zur Penetranz.'[1] The initial critical reaction to Handke's work – condemned as being confusing and almost unreadable – seems, at first glance, to be justified.[2] *Die Hornissen* consists of 67 loosely related 'chapters' with enigmatic headings such as 'Die Insekten auf den Augen des Pferdes' and 'Die Namen der Geräusche.' The only clues to constructing any kind of coherent plot from this kaleidoscopic jumble of episodes are given in a dustjacket note ('Zu diesem Buch') and a penultimate chapter ('Die Entstehung der Geschichte'). The text is narrated in both first and third person voices (sometimes even in the second person) without clear distinctions between speakers and shifts as well between present and past tenses. Some parts are related in indirect discourse, and there is no fixed narrative point of view with which the reader can easily identify. The characters and setting of this elusive 'anti-novel' remain vague and ill-defined. The narration itself often seems mired down in detailed but apparently unmotivated descriptions of random objects and events.

1 Heinrich Vormweg, 'Die Hornissen,' in *Über Peter Handke*, ed. Michael Scharang (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 22.

2 For a sampling of the early reviews of *Die Hornissen*, see the Scharang collection, pp. 17–37. See also Manfred Mixner, *Peter Handke* (Kronberg: Athenäum, 1977), pp. 1–2. Rolf Michaelis gives a selection of the criticism in his 'Ohrfeigen für das Lieblingskind. Peter Handke und seine Kritiker. Eine Beispielsammlung' in *Text + Kritik* 24/24a (1976), 80–96.

This latter aspect especially fueled the hostility of some critics who gleefully accused Handke of the very same 'Beschreibungsimpotenz' that the young author had attributed to the prose of his contemporaries during the well-publicized Princeton meeting of the *Gruppe 47* in 1966.[3] As an excellent example of what Roland Barthes (in his *S/Z*) calls the modernist 'unreadable' text, Handke's *Die Hornissen* deliberately frustrates the more or less traditional expectations concerning plot, character, and point of view that a reader brings to a novel.[4] It seeks to alienate the reader and defamiliarize the reading process; judging from the book's perplexed first reviews, Handke certainly succeeded.

Handke himself has pointed to several influences on his writing. He cites such modernist prose masters as Flaubert, Dostoevsky, Kafka, and William Faulkner.[5] The latter's experiments with narration in works such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), especially the Benjy section, point forward to the disjointed consciousness which guides *Die Hornissen*. Peter Weiss' early prose texts have also been mentioned by both Handke and other critics as a specific influence on this first novel.[6] Of perhaps greater significance for the polemical stance which Handke adopts towards the traditional realist novel is his reading of the essays and novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet and the early structuralism/semiology of Roland Barthes.[7] The former's essays on the novel (*Pour un nouveau roman*, 1963) are clearly of importance for Handke's early writings; and such novels as *Le voyeur* (1955), the shadowy portrait of the child murderer Mathias, seem to prefigure the disturbed

3 See especially Klaus Stiller, 'Die Verwandtschaft des Erzählers. Peter Handkes Prosa,' in *Text + Kritik*, 24 (1969), 43–9.

4 See Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 10.

5 See Handke's essay 'Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms' in his *Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 20.

6 Handke mentions the influence of Peter Weiss in an interview with Peter André Bloch entitled 'Peter Handke' in Peter André Bloch and Alexander Jon Schneller, *Der Schriftsteller und sein Verhältnis zur Sprache, dargestellt am Problem der Tempuswahl: Eine Dokumentation zur Sprache und Literatur der Gegenwart* (Bern und München: Francke, 1971), p. 173. Klaus Stiller also cites Peter Weiss (p. 46).

7 Handke names both Robbe-Grillet and Barthes in his essays and in interviews. More recently, Handke discusses the influence of Barthes in an interview (1979) with June Schlueter in her book *The Plays and Novels of Peter Handke* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), p. 166. Handke's reading of texts by such Russian Formalist critics as Eichenbaum and Shklovsky should also be considered as a formative influence on his early attitudes toward language and writing (Schlueter, p. 12f).

perspectives found in *Die Hornissen* and the later *Die Angst des Tormanne beim Elfmeter* (1970). The insights concerning langauge and perception which Handke found in Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957) and *Élements de sémiologie* (1964) complement the Austrian tradition of *Sprachkritik* from which Handke emerged: Karl Kraus, Fritz Mauthner, Wittgenstein, and more recently, the Vienna and Graz groups.[8]

Some readers (the more patient ones) of *Die Hornissen* have regarded it in light of Handke's early preoccupation with such formalist/structuralist theories of language. His first novel then represents an attempt to unmask the 'reality' depicted in the literary text (and perceived in the 'real' world) as the product of automatized linguistic forms and normative conventions. *Die Hornissen* is thus seen as an illustration of the theoretical positions taken by Handke in essays like 'Zur Tagung der Gruppe 47 in USA' (1966) and 'Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms' (1967). Here Handke argues against what he sees as his contemporaries' naive use of descriptive language, their seeming unawareness of the (repressive) social and ideological norms which 'innocent' linguistic forms often imply. Language is not a mere 'pane of glass' through which we perceive the world. It is, on the contrary, a major constitutive element of perception itself. Considered in this matter, Handke's first novel seems to share the same formal and thematic concerns of such other works of his early period as *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (1966), which exposes the naturalized conventions of the theatre and dramatic writing, and *Kaspar* (1966), which demonstrates the normative conditioning of the personality and perception through the language of society. As one of the first critics to discuss *Die Hornissen* at length, Günter Heintz reflects this point of view, citing both Wittgenstein and Robbe-Grillet as major formative influences; he considers the 'Primat des Sagens, der sprachlichen Vermittlung und Setzung' to be the theme of Handke's text.[9] Other readers of the novel concur with this interpretation and their discussions focus on the issues of language and perception.[10] In view of Handke's own pronouncements on these issues in his early essays and the polemical-

8 For a brief summary of the tradition with which Handke's writing is linked, see Rainer Nägele and Renate Voris, *Peter Handke* (München: C.H. Beck, 1978), pp. 7–24.

9 Günter Heintz, *Peter Handke* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1971), p. 93.

10 Manfred Durzak also cites Wittgenstein and Robbe-Grillet as major influences and sees *Die Hornissen* as revolving around 'ein Erzählen des Erzählens selbst,' a demonstration of the mediated nature of the reality depicted in the literary text. See his *Der deutsche Roman der Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1971), p. 332.

critical spirit of his first writings in general, such critics are certainly correct – if not somewhat repetitive – in their explorations of the formalist/structuralist dimensions of *Die Hornissen*. As the following discussion will show, however, their interpretations do not exhaust the significance which this interesting but difficult text assumes for the author's development. Handke's first novel – like the forgotten 'text' which presumably forms its center – remains a 'lost' work which has yet to find its full resonance in the secondary literature.

A critical re-appraisal of *Die Hornissen* seems warranted for several reasons. First of all, it has become apparent to followers of Handke's fiction that the preoccupation with structuralism and *Sprachkritik* which so determined the polemical stance of his earlier writing represents more of a passing phase in his evolution as a writer. His later texts – most clearly beginning with *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* (1972) – have dealt with themes of pronounced autobiographical significance.[11] Very much in the modernist tradition of authors like Hesse and Rilke, Handke's prose writings constitute a kind of existential aestheticism: personal journeys of self-exploration and self-definition, in which art and the imagination provide a temporary means of transcendence for his often estranged consciousness.[12] Literature – and writing – becomes a mode of existential orientation, a therapeutic act which allows the alienated self to establish authentic connection ('Beziehung') to the external world. It would be wrong, however, to insist that there was some kind of radical change in Handke's interests from a concern with formal and ideological issues of language to a preoccupation with more personal and aesthetic themes. The first lines of

Manfred Mixner echoes Durzak and regards the novel as a 'Demonstration von (literarischer) Vermitteltheit allen (literarischen) Erzählens' (p. 18). Nägele and Voris see *Die Hornissen* as treating the automatized linguistic processes of perception, 'die Routine des alltäglichen und bewußtlosen Benennens' (p. 39). Gunther Sergooris concurs with the other readers of Handke's text and interprets its rejection of traditional narrative forms as 'die Entlarvung der Beschreibung als literarischer Methode' in his *Peter Handke und die Sprache* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1979), p. 44. Although June Schlueter does not discuss *Die Hornissen* at length, she considers both Wittgenstein and French structuralism to be major influences on Handke's early writing.

11 For other comments on the role of autobiography in Handke's writing, see Nägele and Voris (p. 25) and Schlueter (p. 119).

12 See Manfred Durzak's second major essay 'Epische Existenzprotokolle. Die Prosaarbeiten von Peter Handke' in his *Gespräche über den Roman. Formbestimmungen und Analysen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1976). Durzak is one of the first critics to emphasize the existential project of Handke's writing.

16 Handke makes it clear in his 1966 essay, 'Zur Tagung der Gruppe 47 in USA,' that his concern with formal issues of language is based on moral (and existential) scruples. See this essay in the *Elfenbeinturm* collection, p. 34.

neously into consciousness. These memory (and dream) images often occur to him while writing and become a part of the work itself: 'aber mitten im Schreiben kommt irgendwann so eine ganz irre Vorstellung, daß man sich erinnert, wie man in der Kindheit irgendwann einmal nach Hause kam, und da hat jemand Holz gehackt' (DI, p. 321). The example Handke uses here suggests many of the scenes depicted in his first novel. Such moments of spontaneous memory are fundamental to the character of the narrator and they determine the work's narrative organization. With the dustjacket note and the penultimate chapter, the reader can construct a rudimentary 'plot' from the confusion of individual episodes in *Die Hornissen*: a blind man attempts to reconstruct from vaguely recollected quotes and images a novel which he presumably read years ago. The occasion for this project is precisely such an experience of sudden memory: 'Nun aber, eines Tages in einem Sommer, wird er, vielleicht *durch eine Übereinstimmung* dessen, was ihm selber zustößt, mit dem, was dem blinden Helden des Romans zugestoßen ist, eben an jenes verschollene Buch gemahnt, von dem er meint, es vor Zeiten gelesen zu haben' [my emphasis].[17] The simultaneity of past and present serves as the catalyst to this obscure plot. Handke complicates the narrative point of view by suggesting that this unnamed character may confuse memories of his own past with the experiences (and memories) of the protagonist in this forgotten novel (H, p. 2). He takes this deliberate refraction of plot and character a step further in 'Die Entstehung der Geschichte' where a general precis of the lost text is given. The presumed 'novel' deals with two brothers, one of whom went blind in childhood as a result of some (perhaps war-related) accident. The forgotten text which the narrator seeks to reconstruct *also* begins with an incident of involuntary memory. Gregor Benedikt, the blind brother, is suddenly reminded of his missing sibling, Hans, and is plunged into a chaos of memories:

> Fortan wechseln in seinem Gehirn die Stellen, an die er sich zu erinnern glaubt, ohne Ordnung durcheinander ... Die Vorgänge an diesem Sonntag nun entsprechen den Vorgängen an jenem Kriegstag, als ihn die

17 *Die Hornissen* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1968), p. 2. Subsequent references will be to this edition and will be incorporated into the text with the initial H and page number. It should be noted that the 1978 Suhrkamp edition of *Die Hornissen* represents a slightly shortened version of the original hardcover and the Rowohlt paperback editions.

> Blindheit befiel, jedoch nicht in dem äußeren Gebaren und in den Gebärden, sondern nur *in einer Übereinstimmung* dessen, auf das der Blinde stößt, mit dem, auf das er einmal gestoßen ist, ohne daß sie nach außen hin einander ähnlich sind (H, p. 149, my emphasis).

Again the sudden simultaneity of past and present stands at the centre of this second, dimly present text. As a novel about a novel, *Die Hornissen* reveals itself to be a veritable 'hornet's nest' of isolated memories and images. Most readers of Handke's novel agree that this dual narrative perspective is impossible to follow throughout the text and that it subtly merges into a more or less unitary narrative voice.[18] It is to an examination of this narrator figure – whom I will identify, for the sake of convenience, with the name Gregor Benedikt – that I should now like to turn.

The almost Proustian experience of simultaneity which commences the minimal 'plot' of *Die Hornissen* functions as a kind of shock to the narrator, jolting him out of his everyday relationship to reality and plunging him into a state of radical subjectivity, into his chaotic *Innenwelt* of memories. Such moments of the extreme dislocation of consciousness from the world are common in Handke's narrative and they signal the alienation which initiates the existential quest of his characters.[19] In *Die Angst des Tormanns beim Elfmeter*, Josef Bloch's schizophrenic loss of contact with reality begins literally with a 'jolt' to consciousness: 'Es war mit einem Ruck gewesen. Mit einem Ruck

18 See for example Günter Heintz, p. 92f; Manfred Durzak, *Der deutsche Roman*, p. 325; Nägele and Voris, p. 37; Mixner, p. 20; Sergooris, p. 37. With its doubly refracted plot, *Die Hornissen* makes it unusually difficult to focus on the narrator and his motivations. Most see the narrator as more or less a prop for Handke's focus on language as medium and content of perception. Sergooris, for example, sees him as a passive victim of automatized linguistic forms, suffering a loss of identity (p. 41). Durzak sees Gregor Benedikt as plagued by guilt feelings over the presumed drowning of his brother Matt and considers the repression and outburst of these emotions as the pivotal psychological motivations for the character's faulty memory fragments (*Der deutsche Roman*, p. 327). Although there is not quite enough evidence to support Durzak's assumptions, there are several themes and motifs which suggest some kind of psychological fixation on certain memories: the death of Matt, the returning of his body and Gregor's 'blindness,' the disappearance of Hans, and the mysterious 'Mann mit dem Seesack' who may be Hans returning years later.

19 See Manfred Durzak, 'Epische Existenzprotokolle,' on the significance of the 'Schockerlebnis' for Handke's narratives (p. 346). In his interview with Durzak, Handke points to the centrality of what he calls 'Überraschungsmomente' in his fiction (DI, p. 334).

war er aus dem Zusammenhang gerissen.'[20] The first person narrators of *Wunschloses Unglück* (1972) and *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* also experience a radical disruption of their everyday lives: the suicide of the mother and marital problems (and a trip to America) respectively.[21] Gregor Keuschnig in *Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung* (1975) is similar to Josef Bloch in many respects, and his plunge into the chaos of his subjective perceptions commences (in Kafkaesque fashion) with a dream: 'Auf einmal gehörte er nicht mehr dazu.'[22] Marianne in *Die linkshändige Frau* (1976) makes her decision to leave her husband after a moment of sudden illumination at the beginning of the novel. Finally, the pattern of Handke's recent *Langsame Heimkehr* tetralogy also shows the same movement from dislocation and estrangement to the longing for transcendence: the long journey back to the narrator's homeland and – in the last work of the series, *Über die Dörfer* (1981) – to his native village and the circumstances of his childhood. Indeed, this last text suggests a direct link to Handke's first novel: here the two brothers are also named Gregor and Hans. In *Die Hornissen*, the motif of the shock or jolt to consciousness also appears in the novel's final section, 'Das Aussetzen der Erinnerung,' with the image of breaking through a field of ice, a conceit which Handke also employs in *Der Ritt über den Bodensee* (1970). In each of these characters, the sudden dislocation of the self casts the individual from a coherent reality into a bottomless subjectivity, into a chaotic and fragmented world of memory images and luminescent details. The shock experience reveals the unbridgeable gap between the *Innenwelt* of consciousness and the *Außenwelt* of external reality.

The extreme alienation of Gregor Benedikt in his private world of memories is associated with several prominent motifs in Handke's fiction. The estrangement of the self involves a complete and total separation from the world and this manifests itself through what is for Handke the major point of contact between consciousness and

20 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch, 1970), p. 71. Subsequent references will be to this edition and will be incorporated into the text with the initial T and page number.

21 The narrator of the former text notes this state of dislocation in a somewhat bizarrely humorous fashion: 'Die Vorstellung bildet sich gerade und merkt plötzlich, daß es nichts mehr zum Vorstellen gibt. Darauf stürzt sie ab, wie eine Zeichentrickfigur, die bemerkt, daß sie schon die längste Zeit auf der bloßen Luft weitergeht.' *Wunschloses Unglück* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 105. Subsequent references to this work will be to this edition and will be incorporated into the text with the initials WU and page number.

22 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), p. 8.

reality – language. The self is rendered speechless, that is, there is literally no language which can connect the absolute individual to the world. Like the existential figure of Abraham in Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* (1843), the self becomes incommunicable, beyond the universal of language. In the section 'Die Flucht,' Gregor Benedikt experiences a loss of words akin to what Hofmannsthal once described in his well-known 'Ein Brief' (1902): 'Die Worte fielen mir jedoch, bevor ich sie aussprach, zu Silben und Buchstaben auseinander, die ich zu fassen nicht mehr imstande war' (H, p. 13). In 'Der Aufenthalt im Café,' narrated in the third person, Gregor also undergoes a period of speechlessness: 'Er verredet sich in seinen Gedanken; er wird diesen und jenen Buchstaben oder dieses ganze Wort nicht aussprechen können; es gebricht ihm die Gewohnheit der täglichen Unterhaltung; wenn er nach Tagen irgendwo aus einem nichtigen Anlaß seine Stimme vernimmt, fährt er herum und sucht voller Argwohn den Sprecher' (H, p. 125).

The theme of language loss is also indicated in the section entitled 'Der Verlust der Namen.' The intense focus on language in *Die Hornissen* – the vivid description in sections like 'Die Insekten auf den Augen der Pferde' or the obsessive concern with naming and vocabulary in passages like 'Die Namen der Geräusche' – is more than an attempt to illustrate the linguistically mediated nature of reality. Language re-establishes a connection between self and world; it 're-members' experience that has been forgotten. The terrible 'Sprachlosigkeit' which afflicts Gregor Benedikt is a malady common to several other Handke characters. The most obvious examples are to be found in the *Tormann* novel; Josef Bloch often suffers from periods of speechlessness during his schizophrenic wanderings. Many sections of *Die Hornissen* – especially 'Der Heimgang' – seem to prefigure the thought patterns of this later character. The ex-goalie's compulsion to perceive objects and gestures metaphorically is his attempt to overcome such moments of language loss. The desire of the son-narrator of *Wunschloses Unglück* to write about his mother is occasioned by his own 'Momente der äußersten Sprachlosigkeit' at the thought of her suicide (WU, p. 11). The mother's death is also the direct result of her loss of language. When her life is no longer circumscribed by the public storehouse of clichéd language that describes the life of a 'typical woman,' she is left alienated and speechless with no mode of relating herself to others in a meaningful way. In this respect, she is also very similar to Marianne in *Die linkshändige Frau* who becomes silent after abandoning her social roles and masks. The spiritual/existential dis-

tress of Valentin Sorger, the geologist-artist figure of *Langsame Heimkehr* (1979), is closely linked to his states of speechlessness, particularly in the section entitled 'Raumverbot.' The loss of language represents for Handke the ontological nadir of consciousness, a threat to the very existence of the self. Gregor Benedikt's efforts to overcome his speechlessness – to 're-member' his past – is expressive of a very fundamental project in Handke's fiction.

The radical inwardness and alienation of Handke's characters is also manifested by experiences of extreme anxiety. In the section of *Die Hornissen* entitled 'Die Reden der Gendarmen,' there is a long parenthetically enclosed sentence which bears no relationship to its immediate context. It is presented in the past tense as a (sudden) memory of Gregor Benedikt as he thinks of his father:

> Ich lag einmal erwacht und hörte, wie mein Vater im großen Zimmer nach Kräften die Mutter schlug; zuerst verstand ich die gewohnten Worte, die hinter der Mauer die Eltern austauschten, und ich unterschied gut das Klatschen der Schläge, obwohl neben mir auch die Brüder unter Johlen und Lachen einander die Eltern nachäffend zu prügeln anfingen; dann aber wurde ich, als er kräftiger prügelte, gelähmt und lahm, und die Adern sprangen mir auf und betäubten mich, so daß ich für alle Geräusche taub wurde und nur noch das wütende Blut in mir hörte. (H, p. 18)

A good example of one of those sudden memories which Handke mentions to Durzak (DI, p. 321), the sentence relates what the author has himself called a key existential situation in his life and obviously refers to the unpleasant relationship of the young Handke to his often drunk and brutal stepfather.[23] The anxiety provoked by the fighting of the parents – a deviation from the idealized norm of a harmonious childhood – leads to the estrangement and encapsulation of the self. This incident in Handke's own life, or rather his interpretation of its

23 See the informative biography in Hennig Falkenstein, *Peter Handke* (Berlin: Colloquium Verlag, 1974). Handke terms this primal emotional situation 'eine Art Urschock' in an interview with Christian Linder: 'Die Ausbeutung des Bewußtseins. Gespräch mit Peter Handke,' in his *Schreiben und Leben: Gespräche mit Jürgen Becker, Peter Handke, Walter Kempowski, Wolfgang Koeppen, Günter Wallraff, Dieter Wellershoff* (Köln: Kiepenheuer und Witsch, 1974), p. 36. Subsequent references to this interview will be incorporated into the text with the initials LI and page number.

significance, serves to characterize the anxiety-ridden state of many characters in his fiction. The same traumatic event is depicted in much the same terms in *Wunschloses Unglück* as one of the narrator's memories of his childhood and his mother (WU, p. 57f). The narrator-son of this work himself suffers from intense 'Schreckensmomente' (WU, p. 9). Josef Bloch, the narrator of *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied*, and the writer-journalist of *Das Gewicht der Welt* (1977) are all motivated to a great extent by their feelings of anxiety. The motif of extreme anxiety appears often in various sections of *Die Hornissen*. In 'Das Erwachen,' it is associated with that precarious (and Kafkaesque) moment of transition between the inner world of dream and the outer world of waking consciousness when the self is most vulnerable and the gap between reality and the self is most obvious. In the section 'Die Überschwemmung' – which explores the discrepancy between imagination and reality – feelings of death and anxiety predominate in the blind, inner world of Gregor Benedikt. The same feelings occur in the episode 'Der Heimgang' in which Gregor's experience again closely resembles the schizophrenic anxiety of Bloch in the *Tormann* novel. The narrator of *Die Hornissen* evidences another important sign of the radical subjectivity and estrangement which is to be found among other Handke characters: the tendency towards misperceptions or perceptual confusions, 'Verwechslungen,' as the writer of *Das Gewicht der Welt* calls them. In the first section, 'Das Einsetzen der Erinnerung,' Gregor Benedikt sits immersed in contemplation of the embers of a fire, lost in a dream-like trance. When Hans scratches a nail across the windowpane in order to attract his brother's attention, Gregor confuses the sound of the nail with that of a heavy chest being dragged along the floor: 'Ein schwerer Schrank oder eine Kiste wurde über einen Holzboden geschoben' (H, p. 8f). These confusions disclose again the absolute dislocation of consciousness (Gregor's subjective interpretation of the sound) and the reality of the physical world (the sound of the nail). Such mistakes reveal the gap between the *Innenwelt* and *Außenwelt* in Handke's characters. They occur with great frequency in the *Tormann* novel. Bloch is often taken aback – shocked or jolted – by what is shown to be his false perception of external stimuli: 'Bloch hörte ein Geräusch, als sei jemand im Fußboden eingebrochen. Es war aber wieder nur das Holz im Ofen zusammengefallen' (T, p. 49). They also occur repeatedly in the experiences – especially those associated with the waking process – noted by the journalist of *Das Gewicht der Welt*: 'Die Vögel fliegen im Morgengrauen schräg am Fenster vorbei wie fallende Herbstblätter (Verwechslung

im Aufwachen).'[24] On another occasion, he writes down the following observation: 'Der Vogel singt, wie wenn jemand sich ganz schnell die Zähne putzt (und mit diesem Laut und dieser Vorstellung bin ich aufgewacht)' (GW, p. 65). Formulated as similes, the above 'Verwechslungen' suggest that such states of radical inwardness are closely related to an essentially poetic sensibility for Handke. Gregor Benedikt, engaged as he is in the remembering of the past/the re-writing of a forgotten text remains, in the last analysis, himself a writer of fictions.[25]

The most obvious and significant manifestation of Gregor Benedikt's alienation – and his intrinsically poetic state of mind – is his blindness. Most readers of *Die Hornissen* consider the narrator's lack of sight to be expressive of the linguistically mediated perception of reality common to us all; we perceive through language and are thus 'blind' to the world as it really is.[26] Passages from Handke's other early writings – particularly *Selbstbezichtigung* (1966) and a radio program he gave in 1965 – suggest that the loss of sight indeed symbolizes a reality that has become the product of automatized language.[27] There are, however, indications from Handke's later works that its significance even in *Die Hornissen* is thematically closer to the Greek root of the word 'mysticism' – a term not unheard of in Handke criticism – that is, 'to close the eyes, to turn inward.' The writer of *Das Gewicht der Welt* reports several times of his inner feelings of harmony when he closes his eyes and thus becomes 'blind' to the world (GW, pp. 84, 88). In the poem 'Blaues Gedicht' (1973), Handke writes of similar

24 (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 1977), p. 34. Subsequent references will be to this edition and will be incorporated into the text with the initials GW and page number. In his interview with June Schlueter, Handke claims that he considers this work fictional – 'eine Art Roman' (Schlueter, p. 163). Similarly, in the preface to his *Elfenbeinturm* collection of essays, he prefers that such expository texts be read 'als Geschichten' (p. 8). These are both good examples of the fine line between autobiography and fiction, reality and linguistic formulation, in Handke's writings.

25 In a question and answer session held on May 12, 1976 during the University of Southern California German Semester, Handke discussed the origin of metaphors in his writing and referred to them as 'eine Art Verwechslung' or 'Verdoppelungen' in his perception (Videotape).

26 On the meaning of the narrator's blindness, see Heintz, p. 105; Durzak, *Der deutsche Roman*, p. 325; Falkenstein, p. 27; Mixner, p. 1; Nägele and Voris, p. 38; Sergooris, p. 38.

27 Cf. the following lines from *Selbstbezichtigung* in *Stücke I* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972): 'Ich habe den Worten für die Gegenstände blindlings Worte für die Eigenschaften der Gegenstände gegeben. Ich habe mit den Worten für die Eigenschaften der Gegenstände blindlings die Welt angeschaut' (p. 78).

experiences in a manner which directly suggests the blind narrator of *Die Hornissen* and his inner world of memory images.[28] The opening section, 'Das Einsetzen der Erinnerung,' relates how Hans finds Gregor immersed in a dream-like trance and the former's description suggests that Gregor's blindness is related to a lively inner vision: 'Schon an diesem Morgen, sagte mein Bruder, hätte ich mit meinen zuckenden Lidern einem Blinden ähnlich gesehen und ähnlich einem Blinden geschaut' (H, p. 9). In the chapter entitled 'Der Zwiespalt,' it is implied that the narrator's blindness is perhaps a fiction – 'Besonders an ihm ist seine Blindheit, und die ist vielleicht nur erlogen' (H, p. 126) – and the penultimate chapter associates his lack of sight with the mythical notion of the seer or visionary: 'In vielen Sagen ist gerade der Blinde ein Seher. Der Seher ist blind' (H, p. 150). Although it is true that we who see the world through language are therefore often 'blind,' it is also true in *Die Hornissen* that the narrator's blindness suggests an inner, subjective vision, a twilight world in which memory and phantasy images predominate. This reverie-dream state is the most important aspect of Gregor Benedikt's radical *Innerlichkeit* and it deserves further comment; first, however, another facet of his blindness must be mentioned, that is, his subsequent reliance on sounds and smells.

The narrator's loss of visual contact with the world causes his au-

28 Cf. the following lines from 'Blaues Gedicht' in *Als das Wünschen noch geholfen hat* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), p. 67:

Die Geräusche waren die Geräusche aus der
Dingwelt
Es roch nach ...
Ich brauchte gar nicht die Augen zu schließen
um ganz andre Vorgänge zu erleben
als ich sie vor mir hatte
und die 'wirklichen' Bilder dabei zu beschreiben
die 'Tatsachen'
das wäre beliebig
denn tatsächlich
waren nur die 'anderen' Bilder
in die mich die 'wirklichen' mehr und mehr
einwiegten
und die 'anderen' Bilder
waren keine Allegorien
sondern durch das Wohlgefühl
befreite Augenblicke
aus der Vergangenheit
[Ellipsis in the text]

ditory and olfactory senses to be highly acute, and they shape his perception to a great extent. Readers of Handke's fiction will recognize the importance of these senses for his other characters.[29] Like the smell and taste of the petite madeleine which launches Proust's epic of memory, sound and smell have a highly personal meaning for Handke as modes of access to the past; they serve as catalysts to the remembering of forgotten experiences. In 'Der Auftritt der Frau,' Gregor describes the sounds made by his father while drinking (H, p. 40) in a manner which directly calls to mind the memories later noted by the writer of *Das Gewicht der Welt* (GW, p. 41f). In another journal entry, the writer links particular smells with long lost memories of childhood (GW, p. 49f). Odors figure predominantly in Gregor Benedikt's perceptions. In 'Der Ausguß,' a particular smell – that of sour, dried milk – serves as the stimulus to the reconstruction of forgotten memories (H, p. 75). He emphasizes the importance of this smell as a trigger of past experience in the section 'Das Wort "geschehen" ': 'In dem Ausguß, aus dem es schon immer nach fauler Milch und nach fauligem Wasser stinkt, geschieht nichts und ist nichts geschehen, wohl aber in dem, der, als er sich vorbeugt, plötzlich daraus den Geruch in sich hineinschluckt' (H, p. 73). Gregor Benedikt's sensitivity to sounds and smells signals an intense subjectivity which is dominated – in ironic contrast to his 'blindness' – by a highly visual, dream-like inner life of images and memories.

Shocked or jolted by the sudden simultaneity of past and present which commences *Die Hornissen*, Gregor is cast into an alienated and highly subjective state of mind which greatly resembles a kind of dream or reverie consciousness. Such experiences are apparently common to Handke and they form – in what he terms a 'Halbschlafzustand' – a rather prominent motif in his fiction. They are mentioned several times in *Die Hornissen* (H, pp. 32, 84, 101, 113). There is also a story entitled 'Halbschlafgeschichten' from the early collection *Die Begrüßung des Aufsichtsrats*. The narrator of *Der kurze Brief zum langen*

29 For example, sharp sudden sounds – as in 'knallen,' 'klatschen' – abound in Handke's early fiction. They function as a consistent motif associated with the sudden jolt or dislocation of the self. See the sharp ringing sound of the doorknob in *Die Hornissen* (H, p. 9). Josef Bloch is continually assailed by sudden noises (T, pp. 39, 58, 91, 110f). Smells are also prominent motifs linked with memories. The narrator of *Wunschloses Unglück* remembers his mother's 'Speichelgeruch' (WU p. 101).

30 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 154. He also mentions his own 'ruckhaften Halbschlafgedanken' (p. 23).

Abschied speaks on one occasion of his 'Halbschlafbilder.'[30] This twilight state is also mentioned several times in connection with Josef Bloch in the *Tormann* novel (T, pp. 90, 104). The 'Halbschlafzustand' and the 'Halbschlafbilder' occur in Handke's more recent fiction, including *Langsame Heimkehr* and *Die Lehre der Sainte Victoire* (1980). The writer figure of *Das Gewicht der Welt* frequently notes such experiences, and his comments help to illuminate their importance for Handke's other characters. Lying down with his eyes closed, he becomes – like Gregor Benedikt – 'blind' to the outside world but alive to the 'Bilder' of memory and imagination: 'Die Halbschlafbilder, zu denen man gelangt, wenn es einem glückt, innerhalb der geschlossenen Augen noch einmal die Augen zu schließen: dann leben sogar die Steine' (GW, p. 104). These 'Bilder' are not dream representations of people or things seen during the day (GW, p. 281); they are isolated images and memories which seem to surface from the murky depths of the unconscious: 'Ein Rad dreht sich unter der stillen Erdoberfläche, und dieses sich drehende Rad bricht plötzlich im Halbschlaf an einer Stelle durch die Erdkruste' (GW, p. 181). Handke has an extremely eidetic imagination, and such mental pictures figure prominently in his fiction. He once described his method of writing as a kind of conscious dreaming, a designation which both suggests the same indeterminate state of the 'Halbschlafzustand' and which underscores the importance of such reverie states in his fiction.[31]

These spontaneous reverie and memory images determine the narrative structure of *Die Hornissen*; its organization is based on the authenticity of memory fragments and details from vaguely recollected childhood scenes and events. They are incorporated into the text as remembered quotes or images from the forgotten novel and as such form the basis for the imaginative reconstructions of the past which make up the work itself. The starting point for *Die Hornissen* – as Handke related it several years later – is with the blind narrator lying in bed in a reverie-like state and imagining his past.[32] His quest is activated by his inability to remember: 'Wenn er zwar von etwas weiß, aber nicht erfahren kann, was es ist und wie es ist, so verlockt es ihn zu wissen. Das Unerreichbare lockt' (H, p. 148). The writer figure of *Das Gewicht der Welt* expresses a similar frustration with his own tend-

31 Handke says that at times he concentrates as intensely 'als wär's ein Traum, aber ein Traum, den man künstlich herbeischafft, nicht so, als wenn man ihn passiv erlebt als gleichzeitig geträumten (LI, p. 37).

32 Peter André Bloch interview, p. 172.

ency to forget. His past experience becomes incommunicable, distorted as 'etwas völlig Gestaltloses,' and it remains his task as author to transform these nebulous memories and images into 'die mythologischen Bilder meines Bewußtseins und meiner Existenz' (GW, p. 31). These are not intended to be truthful reconstructions of the past; they are rather new, private – or existential – myths of the individual, made plausible or verisimilar through a style of writing which is 'vorstellungs- und sprachfest' (GW, p. 32), based on a highly visual and metonymic prose. This is the same criterion of concrete detail which is imposed on the reconstruction of the presumed forgotten novel in *Die Hornissen*: 'Jedoch hat seine Erinnerung keine Beweiskraft; was er ausgedacht hat, braucht nicht wahr zu sein, in dem Sinn, daß es mit den Vorgängen im Buch glaubwürdig übereinstimmt; es braucht nur möglich und vorstellbar zu sein (H, p. 150).

A critic once described the style of Handke's early prose writings as 'kreatürlich,' consisting of sentences 'gewonnen aus unmittelbarer Anschauung als eigener Möglichkeit von Erkenntnis.'[33] Details – and the fragmentary, in general – are a central concern in much of Handke's writing. Bloch in the *Tormann* novel is both plagued and drawn by details as is Keuschnig in *Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung*. The narrative of *Wunschloses Unglück* is dominated by the metonymic and at its conclusion breaks down into fragmented observations and memories.[34] The style of *Das Gewicht der Welt* is also determined by the fragment and the isolated detail. Indeed, there are certain parallels (as well as disjunctures) between *Die Hornissen* and this later, semifictional journal. The writer-journalist notes in the preface to this latter work that his text is filled with images which are missing their appropriate contexts: 'zum Zustandekommen mancher Aufzeichnungen könnte man Geschichten erzählen, wie man sie erzählen hört zu Bildern, die jemand von einer Expedition mitbringt; nur vielleicht komischer' (GW, p. 6f). Handke made much the same comment in an interview with regard to his first novel: 'Und so sind in den *Hornissen* ... schon viele Bilder drin, wo die Ursachen, die Vorgeschichten und Nachgeschichten abgeschnitten sind' (AI, p. 26). In this earlier novel, these 'Bilder' often serve as the catalysts to the fictional reconstruction

33 Walter Helmut Fritz, 'Kreatürliche Sätze. Peter Handkes frühe Prosa,' in *Text + Kritik*, 24/24a (1976), 79.

34 See David H. Miles, 'Reality and the Two Realisms: Mimesis in Auerbach, Lukács, and Handke' in *Monatshefte*, 71 (1979), 371–8. See also Schlueter's discussion of *Wunschloses Unglück* (pp. 119–36).

of their immediate contexts and this in a style which often deliberately suggests the falsely mediating nature of language. In the journal, however, the author's intention is to overcome the distorting effects of writing. In both cases, however, the isolated image, detail, and fragment form the basis of the text.

Despite the deliberate attempts to distort language (which, as noted earlier, Handke now rejects), much of *Die Hornissen* is characterized by this highly metonymic and paratactic style. Handke once described himself as 'ein unheimlicher Anhänger von Einzelheiten' (DI, p. 327) and characterized his method of working as a kind of automatic writing in which he lets himself be guided by the details preserved in memories: 'die Erinnerung hat gearbeitet, und man hat jetzt unheimlich viele Einzelheiten, und eines Tages setzt man sich hin und schreibt ... Und man schreibt völlig ohne Plan, man läßt sich lenken von den Einzelheiten' (DI, p. 339). Gregor Benedikt's consciousness is dominated by such images and details and there is a strong suggestion of their spontaneous or automatic quality. In the section entitled 'Die Entstehung einer Episode beim Frühstück,' he is depicted in a reverie or semi-conscious state, yet awakened to a lively inner world of 'Bilder' which focus on the long-awaited return of his brother Hans.

The impression created in this section directly echoes that of a film script in the hands of a director, a medium not unknown to Handke himself and a distinct preoccupation of the blind narrator who – in the sections 'Der Vorraum' and 'Die Alarmlage' – is (ironically) drawn to movie theatres. The 'blindness' of Gregor's reverie world is very much akin to the darkness of a movie theatre in which his 'Halbschlafbilder' are projected. The writer of *Das Gewicht der Welt* describes a film of his life as 'eine lange Abfolge von Schwarzfilm, in dem nur ab und zu etwas aufflackerte' (GW, p. 32), a film of momentary flashes of memory images. He also terms his own 'Halbschlafbilder' a silent film, 'ein majestätischer Stummfilm aus neu-mythischen Bildern' (GW, p. 281). Film – which combines a unique mixture of the mediated and unmediated vision – is like a kind of conscious dreaming or reverie, and Gregor's predilection for movie theatres is very much a logical one. Much of his imagining recalls the vocabulary of film editing (a 'dissolve'): 'Ich sehe den Mann am Bassin stehen. Ich lösche und überblende das Bild der elektrischen Uhr. Ich lösche das Bild des Zuges und überblende das Bild des Bahnsteigs' (H, p. 50). Because of his apparent fixation on his brother's return, Gregor's 'Bilder' are highly artificial and literally 'directed' and as such are false reverie images, an aspect of the 'Halbschlafzustand' which the writer of *Das*

Gewicht der Welt notes about his own imagining: 'Falsche Halbschlafbilder: die ich *herstelle*, statt sie geschehen zu lassen' (GW, p. 194; Handke's emphasis). At several points, however, Gregor loses control of these images and they become spontaneous: 'Ich sehe gegen den Willen ein Bild von dem Spalt zwischen den Schwingtürflügeln des Warteraums. Ich ergebe mich diesen Bildern' (H, p. 50). Also, in the section 'Die Müdigkeit,' Gregor is in a radically interiorized state and his thoughts become automatic: 'und weil kein Geräusch mehr mich festhält, treiben mich die Gedanken im Niemandsland umher; es sind nicht Gedanken, die ich mir mache, sondern Gedanken, die mir gemacht werden' (H, p. 84). The writer figure of *Das Gewicht der Welt* notes a similar experience as he drifts from the more conscious aspect of the 'Halbschlafzustand' to unconscious dreaming; his reverie images lost 'ihre schöne Erdenschwere und wurden flink und "ohne mich" ' (GW, p. 158). In these states the alienated self achieves a moment of liberation, an overcoming of its absolute individuality.[35] Like the sudden 'Übereinstimmung' of past and present which initiates the quest of remembering, such moments of spontaneous memory comprise the basic structural unit of *Die Hornissen* and they determine its often dense and dream-like quality.

Virtually all previous critics of Handke's first novel have seen the work as a 'deconstruction' of traditional reader expectations, a more or less analytic attempt to uncover the confusion of linguistic 'reality' with the genuine reality which it represents. Yet, it must be kept in mind that the basic fiction of this obscure, doubly refracted text is a *synthetic* one: the reconstruction of a forgotten novel/the remembering of a repressed past. Forgetting is a mode of alienation in Handke's fiction which leads to a fragmented self without a sense of genuine relationship to the world. The writer figure of *Das Gewicht der Welt* is preoccupied with the theme of forgetting; indeed, the rationale behind the writing of the journal itself is to forestall such loss of experience. The following pair of entries is typical of both his dilemma and his attempt to overcome it: 'Erinnerungsruinen: Ich versuche, mich an Einzelheiten von Orten, Häusern, Gesichtern zu erinnern,

35 In the Linder interview, Handke specifically associates his experiences of memory with a kind of momentary transcendence during which his painful individuality is overcome and he experiences the self as a kind of medium: 'Außerdem braucht man so eine Erinnerung, um weiterschreiben zu können, Erinnerung meint hier ein sehr körperliches Gefühl, andererseits auch ein Gefühl, in dem man selber als Individuum gar nicht so vorkommt, sondern eben als Medium' (LI, p. 38).

und es kommen nur Ruinen zustande/Staubzucker auf den Schuhen vom Krapfenessen (Ö)' (GW, p. 53). He laments the fragmented nature of his memories and then gives one such highly visual memory 'ruin' from his Austrian childhood. The very act of noting such memories represents the effort to recapture what has been lost. These marginal and incidental details which surface spontaneously from the depths of the psyche are like the unconnected pieces of a puzzle, and it is the task of Handke's fiction – and of Gregor Benedikt of *Die Hornissen* in particular – to re-assemble these fragments into new visions or 'myths' of the self, to re-establish through writing the wholeness or connectedness of the individual.

The guideline set for the reconstruction of the 'forgotten' novel is *not* that it be true to the past but only 'möglich und vorstellbar' (H, p. 150), that is, fictional but visually concrete. Like the author himself, the blind narrator is a writer of 'fictions' which offer imaginative visions of other *possible* ways of existing and as such provide the alienated self with a momentary 'escape' or transcendence.[36] As Handke once suggested to Manfred Durzak, his work is motivated by a terrible sense of the isolation and unrelatedness of consciousness – 'das Ichgefühl, was das für ein erschreckendes Gefühl ist' – and this experience becomes for him 'ein Antrieb zum Erkennen, zum Schauen, ein Antrieb, etwas in Distanz zu bringen, in Beziehungen' (DI, p. 334). The experience of alientation generates the need for transcendence of the self; writing becomes the expression of an almost religious need for relatedness, the 'Sehnsucht nach einem Bezugssystem,' as Handke once phrased it (LI, p. 34). The quest for 'Beziehung' is closely linked to the act of remembering, especially to such fleeting moments of sudden simultaneity as the ones which begin *Die Hornissen.* These experiences of involuntary memory lend the self a sense of stability and, as Handke claims, a feeling of relatedness 'Und dann, wenn ich mich an etwas erinnere von früher: dann ist da so ein Verbundenheitsgefühl, ein Gefühl von Existenz, Geborgenheit, so ein Lebensgefühl, daß ich nichts Böses tun könnte in diesem Moment' (DI, p. 343). From Gregor Benedikt in *Die Hornissen* to the protagonists in the recent *Langsame Heimkehr* tetralogy, this existential quest for self-transcendence has been the 'ganz klare Kontinuität' which Handke has described in his writing (DI, p. 332). In the title novel of the

36 In the Linder interview, Handke also links writing with momentary experiences of transcendence: 'Dann wird das Subjekt, als das ich mich fühle und nicht gern fühle, zum Medium, schreibend fühle ich mich wirklich als Medium' (LI, p. 37).

tetralogy, Valentin Sorger is consumed by this same longing for 'Beziehung' and the 'geology' which he practises is on the inner terrain of the self and memory. He is working on a book, 'Über Räume,' and it deals with, as does *Die Hornissen*, the 'geography' of childhood: 'Und das war auch Sorgers erste Idee gewesen: die Feldformen der (seiner) Kindheit zu beschreiben: Pläne zu zeichnen von den ganz anderen "interessanten Punkten"; Längs- und Querschnitte herzustellen von all den zunächst undurchdringlichen, im Gedächtnis aber erst das Zuhause-Gefühl erzeugenden Flurzeichen der Kindheit – nicht für Kinder, sondern für sich selber.'[37] Handke summarizes here what was the very project of his first novel. Like the geologist-artist Sorger, Gregor Benedikt seeks to regain the 'Längs- und Querschnitte,' the fragmented memories, of his childhood. True to the existential nature of the individual, however, this quest for transcendence can never be completed. *Langsame Heimkehr* remains the opening novel of a series. The search for the lost text and the remembrance of childhood in *Die Hornissen* never achieve their goal. Handke's first extended prose text does not become a 'whole' novel, but rather, as the dustjacket note suggests, it too remains incomplete: 'Die "Hornissen" sind der Versuch, die Entstehung eines Romans zu beschreiben' (H, p. 2).

37 (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), p. 109.